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ABSTRACT

This issue describes how researchers are studying ways to reduce the overrepresentation of students from minority backgrounds in special education. It begins by discussing problems associated with inappropriate classification and placement of minority students, including being denied access to the general education curriculum, being placed in separate programs with more limited curriculum that may affect the students' access to postsecondary education and employment opportunities, and being stigmatized with a misclassification that may negatively affect the student's self-perception, as well as the perceptions of others. Efforts by the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education, to support research that addresses disproportionate representation are then described. The program Skills Profiled through Arts, Reading, and Knowledge (SPARK) is profiled as a model preschool creative arts curriculum for teachers of young children with developmental delays or at risk of developing delays. Other studies are described that are investigating literacy strengths and difficulties faced by language minority students with learning disabilities, developing a demonstration model that provides a community-based program focused on serving children with emotional disturbance in a culturally competent manner, and establishing teacher training programs to prepare teachers to teach culturally and linguistically diverse populations. (CR)

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Research Connections

in Special Education

This Issue

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Since the 1960s when the issue of overrepresentation of minority students in special education first received national attention, the federal government has sought ways to improve achievement results for culturally and linguistically diverse students. This issue describes how researchers are studying ways to reduce disproportionality.

More minority children continue to be served in special education than would be expected from the percentage of minority students in the general school population.

(IDEA Amendments of 1997, P.L. 105-17)

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Improving Results for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students

Children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds comprise a large percentage of public school students, particularly in large-city school districts where the percentage of minority students may be as high as 80 percent. In response to the nation's shifting demographics, the U.S. Congress stated in the 1997 Reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), that the Federal Government must be responsive to the growing educational needs of an increasingly more diverse society.

Congress has called for greater efforts to ensure that minority children are classified accurately and appropriately placed. According to the 19th Annual Report to Congress, problems associated with inappropriate classification and placement include:

- Being denied access to the general education curriculum.
- Being placed in separate programs with more limited curriculum that may impact the student's access to post secondary education and employment opportunities.
- Being stigmatized with a misclassification that may negatively impact the student's self-perception, as well as the perceptions of others.

Reducing disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education is not a new concern. Researchers and practitioners have long debated the issue with varying results.

The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) is committed to supporting research that addresses disproportion-

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Improving Results for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students (continued from page 1)

ate representation. OSEP funds research and technical assistance activities that provide insight into the issues and strategies related to this complex issue. This ***Research Connections*** takes a look at how selected researchers are investigating ways to prevent and reduce disproportionality of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education.

Ongoing Research: Identifying the Issues Related to Overrepresentation

Over the years, both OSEP and the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) have funded research investigating this issue. Researchers have moved from looking at the data to determine if a problem exists, to investigating what can be done to reduce or eliminate it. Two examples follow.

Looking to the Past for Insights Into the Present

With OSEP funding, the National Research Council at the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) is undertaking a two-year study of the representation of minority children in special education and gifted and talented programs. The committee carrying out the Congressionally mandated study is composed of researchers in education, developmental psychology, neuro-pediatrics, sociology, law, education policy, and special education. The study, which the Academy expects to release in March 2001, follows an earlier 1982 report on a similar topic.

The present report will look at how minority representation has changed since 1982. Among the factors to be considered are early biological, environmental, social, and economic factors that influence health and development, as well as the availability and quality of early intervention and preschool programs, and the school experience itself.

Throughout its deliberations, the committee plans to address the following the following questions:

- When, under what conditions, and for whom is special education a benefit or a risk factor?
- Can the number of children who require special education services be reduced by improving the quality of general education, improving the capacity of the schools to prevent and address behavioral problems early on, and by early intervention efforts for children at risk for disability?

Understanding Complexity

Overrepresentation of minorities in special education is clearly a complex issue. Over the years, researchers have considered many entry points for investigations.

With OSEP support, **Beth Harry** and **Janette Klingner** are investigating exemplary special education referral and decision making processes for culturally and linguistically diverse students. "Through our research we are seeking to understand and explain how the processes used to identify, assess, and place students in high incidence special education programs may contribute to the overidentification and overrepresentation of ethnic minority students in such programs," Harry explains. "However, our emphasis also is on identifying processes that successfully prevent overrepresentation while providing beneficial educational results for students."

The research — which Klingner describes as looking beyond the surface information of numbers and rates — is being conducted as a three-phrase process. "We are moving from a description of countywide placement rates and referral/placement policy, to an examination of the implementation of the referral/placement policies in individual schools, and then to individual case studies of students," Klingner states. The subject group for the study includes children in grades K-3.

Although they are in the early stages of their work, they are finding that professionals generally attribute overrepresentation to one of the following sources:

- Family and community issues.
- External pressures in schools (e.g., high stakes assessments, mandated curriculum).
- Classroom instruction and classroom management.
- Intrinsic characteristics of children themselves.
- Teacher perceptions and attitudes.

"We are currently analyzing observations for evidence — both examples and counter examples — of professionals' explanations," Harry points out. "This will help us develop a theory that takes account of the perspectives of practitioners (insiders) as well as our own observations as researchers (outsiders)."

Promising Strategies that Support Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students with Disabilities

Following are examples of how researchers — all with OSEP support — are discovering strategies to improve achievement results for culturally and linguistically diverse students with special needs.

Early Intervention: Making the Curriculum Relevant

Incongruity between the content of a traditional curriculum and the lives and histories of children of color has been a consistent research theme. **Susan Fowler**, Dean at the University of Illinois, and her colleague **Beverly Lewman** in the Department of Special Education have developed and are assessing the impact of a culturally appropriate preschool curriculum.

SPARK — which stands for *Skills Promoted through Arts, Reading, and Knowledge* — is a preschool creative arts curriculum for teachers of young children with developmental delays or at risk of developing delays. It is based on stories and resources from many cultural and ethnic traditions. "SPARK is a literacy-based culturally sensitive curriculum that provides opportunities for preschool children to achieve developmental and school readiness skills by actively attending to stories and by participating in activities based on music, art, and drama," Fowler describes. "It allows teachers to promote the learning needs of children at a variety of levels, which makes it appropriate for use in inclusive settings or in self-contained ones."

The SPARK curriculum requires one hour each day. There are 25 units, with 100 story telling activities, 100 art activities, 100 music activities, 100 make-believe activities, and 25 closure activities. Activities are organized around a preliteracy program of repeated, collaborative story reading. Each unit takes one week to complete and is based on a story that the teacher reads to the children every day of the week. According to Fowler, "It is important for the teacher to read (or to tell) the unit story every day. Repetition of the story helps children become more aware of the language patterns and general themes used in the story, become involved in the discussion, relate the story to their own experiences, develop recall skills, and learn to predict what will happen next."

> *"Featuring the child's culture in a story gives them something familiar to relate to and to connect to other learnings."*
>
> *Jennifer Christianson, Teacher*
> *North St. Paul Head Start*
> *Minnesota*

"English vocabulary is emphasized, but when a student does not understand English, a bilingual aide or teacher interprets in the child's home language, and, as needed, audiotapes the stories in the child's home language," Fowler tells us. "Staff members report that the curriculum helps students who speak English as a second language learn English faster than students who were not exposed to the curriculum."

SPARK in Action

Thus far the SPARK curriculum has been field-tested with over 6,000 children and their families in several states. Children represent diverse backgrounds, including African American, Hispanic, Asian American, Native American, and Euro-American.

Jacqui Kirkpatrick, supervisor of the early childhood special education program in Calcasieu Parish, LA, brought the curriculum to her district because she wanted an approach that gave teachers more structure, was developmentally appropriate, and that was engaging and meaningful for children. "The SPARK curriculum provided a way for teachers and paraprofessionals to develop a consistent approach to their instruction," Kirkpatrick tells us. "The repetitive teaching component was particularly attractive to teachers because they saw results."

Lisa Booth, a preschool teacher in Calcasieu Parish, LA, was very pleased with the approach. "I have a diverse group of children, including a child with severe developmental disabilities and children with speech delays. The stories and the activities allowed all of the children to learn together as a group." For example, Booth explained that art activities can be equalizers for children. "All children can participate in music and art activities — they can all be successful." Booth also found the repetition of stories and the use of familiar things in the stories to be particularly useful in helping children learn the concepts. "Children loved hearing the stories over and over. The repetition helped them be more involved in the story so they could develop prediction and recall, and engage in reflections."

Kirkpatrick offers the following advice to administrators considering implementing the curriculum

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with their staff. " Start with a pilot group and provide them with a lot of support." Among the variety of supports Kirkpatrick found useful were

- Train the paraprofessionals with the teachers.
- Arrange for ongoing small group meetings for teachers.
- Reinforce teachers and provide ongoing attention.
- Launch the implementation immediately after training.
- Handle the costs for materials.
- Develop a plan for organizing and storing materials.
- Encourage teachers to keep a log on parent involvement.

Redleaf Press (651-641-6609) plans to publish SPARK Curriculum in Fall 2001.

Instruction: Building Upon Students' Strengths

With OSEP support, researcher **Robert Jimenez** has been studying the literacy strengths and difficulties faced by language minority students with learning disabilities in grades 4 to 6 and developing instructional interventions for them. "I was motivated by the fact that Latino children are performing below where they should, given their ability," Jimenez explains. "But I was particularly interested in those students who had language learning difficulties plus poor literacy instruction, and who were learning disabled."

Jimenez has been researching strategies that facilitate literacy in these children. "I first looked at Latino students who were high performing and identified the strategies that they used," Jimenez explains. "We then looked at low-performing students and found that less successful bilingual readers view their two languages as separate and unrelated, and they often see their non-English language backgrounds as detrimental."

The goal is to help low-performing students think and behave more like successful bilingual readers. For Jimenez, this means helping low-performing bilingual readers to understand the relationship between the Spanish and English-language literacy systems. "It is particularly important to help students transfer or apply their literacy knowledge and abilities from one language to another," Jimenez asserts. "They need to learn how to strategically implement this knowledge in a timely manner while reading, and they need to learn well-defined strategies for confronting unknown words or unfamiliar expressions in English."

Jimenez is investigating a number of strategies. One is the metacognitive awareness of reading strategies. Low performing readers often have naive conceptions about the purpose of reading. For example, students from language-minority backgrounds often pursue finishing the task as their primary objective and believe that reading is synonymous with decoding and pronunciation of isolated words. Jimenez supports explicit instruction of strategic reading processes, including how to access what students know in their primary language. Strategies that successful bilingual readers share with successful monolingual readers include making inferences, drawing conclusions, integrating prior knowledge into ongoing meaning construction, and asking questions when comprehension breaks down.

In addition, Jimenez has identified some strategies that he suspects may be indicative of a bilingual schema for reading. Jimenez provides the following example. Searching for vocabulary is a reading strategy that draws on the native-language strength of Spanish-English bilingual students. When students are confronted with unfamiliar vocabulary, they check to see whether they know a related word in their own language. Related bilingual reading strategies include translating, transferring information across languages, and reflecting on text either in Spanish or English. "These are strategies that help low performing bilingual students improve comprehension, but they also appear to be indicators of a fairly well developed Spanish-English bilingual scheme for reading," Jimenez adds. "We need to let students know that they are okay, that being bilingual is not a problem — in fact, it has advantages," Jimenez asserts.

Seeing Results in the Classroom

"I think that all my students achieved success, at varying degrees, of course." For fifth grade teacher **Esperanza Villarreal-Ortiz**, Jimenez' approach resulted in many successes. All, with the exception of one student were Mexican or Mexican Americans. Most were from monolingual households, and most were receiving some sort of school assistance. Some students were in the bilingual program for over 8 years, some were new arrivals, and some students were transitioning out of the bilingual classroom.

Villarreal-Ortiz offers this example. "I remember one student had very few language skills in either language. One day, I asked the students to illustrate what I had read. I was so surprised at this boy's

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understanding and artistic talent. While he was not able to verbalize his understanding, he was able to illustrate his understanding of both languages. Once he knew I understood him, he began to take more risks in communication, particularly in the small group settings of literature circles."

According to Villarreal-Ortiz it can be difficult to implement the strategies with students if the district leadership does not accept the basic premises. "Generally, most bilingual teachers are taught not to use both English and Spanish in the same sentence or thought patterns. So, for example, I should not say, 'Come on, vamonos a la tienda.' This is called code switching and many professionals believe it is wrong to use it. However, Robert's research validated something that I intuitively knew — that second language learners find themselves doing this quite often. You know this to be true if you grew up in Texas where Spanish and English are often spoken by both Anglos and Latinos. They code switch all of the time. For my students, code switching allowed them to feel comfortable trying out their second language. It further substantiated their confidence in taking the necessary risks for learning."

Family Involvement: Respecting Diverse Backgrounds

Several years ago, the Highland Park School District in Michigan received support from OSEP to develop a demonstration model that provided a community-based program focused on serving children with emotional disturbance in a culturally competent manner.

Today, the district fully funds the program, which provides wraparound services to middle school youngsters. Wraparound refers to an approach of surrounding the child and the family with a network of services in natural home, school, and community environments.

Family involvement is a key component of the Highland Park approach. "Throughout all aspects of the program, families are key team members," asserts **LeVan Townsel**, program director. "Families are involved in identifying supports and designing implementation plans for the services they and their child receive." According to Townsel, the success of the approach is based on an underlying core belief that families are not the source of their child's difficulty, but rather are partners in planning for their child's needs.

Program staff have learned much about being culturally sensitive when interacting with families. Townsel offers the following recommendations:

- **Take time to educate the family.** Many families do not know what emotional disturbance means. They may not feel comfortable asking questions. In cases where they know about special education, they may view the process negatively.
- **Go to the family.** Whenever possible, meet with the family in the home.
- **Arrange parent support groups.** Help parents come together to support each other. Encourage them to develop advocacy skills.
- **Find out what the parent needs.** Often times parents need support or an extra boost. Find out what might help them feel more confident.
- **Push for parent membership on school and community teams and boards.** Parents should be given opportunities to contribute their expertise in ways that are not directly related to their own child.
- **Encourage parents to talk about their dreams for the child.** Don't tell parents what is wrong with their situation. They already know.
- **Know the difference between the culture of the family and the economic situation that the family is in.** It is important to understand how poverty affects families. For example, families may have experience working with welfare agencies who do business differently than schools. It is important to understand behaviors from many contexts and to take an integrated approach to understanding people.
- **Learn as much about the culture of the families with whom you are working as possible.** Find out the values — how they view disabilities and mental health issues.

Prior to the OSEP project, students in Highland Park had a 90 percent failure rate on the statewide assessment test; 65 percent of students at the middle school were expelled or suspended annually for behavioral infractions. At the end of the grant period, external evaluations showed significant student improvement, including a reduction of 75 percent in referrals out of classrooms for disruptive behavior.

Views From the Field

The 1997 IDEA Amendments emphasized the need to increase the number of teachers and related service personnel from culturally and linguistically diverse groups. Efforts are underway to recruit new minority teachers and to increase the cultural competence of non-minority teachers.

Taking the Program to the Community

With OSEP support, the University of Northern Arizona (NAU) is partnering with the Kayenta Unified School District to prepare teachers. Referred to as RAISE (Reaching American Indian Special/Elementary Educators), the project prepares both Navaho and non-Navaho students to earn dual certification in special and elementary education. "The program focuses on preparing individuals to teach in impoverished rural and remote areas with culturally and linguistically diverse populations," **Greg Prater**, a professor at NAU tells us.

Most of the Navaho students are currently working as paraprofessionals or general educators with the district. Non-Navaho students live in Kayenta, which is a very remote community on the Navaho Nation. The district provides the non-Navaho students housing at no cost, and, in return, the university students work in the schools.

In addition, **Connie Heimbecker**, a NAU faculty member, lives in Kayenta and teaches courses on site." You have the opportunity to learn more about the culture and the language," Heimbecker says. "By contextualizing the curriculum and student teaching experiences, you are able to incorporate more meaningful things into the coursework."

According to Prater, other districts have shown an interest in replicating the approach. He cautions, though, that it is more difficult to run such a program than a more traditional preservice training program on-campus. "You need to be sensitive to the needs of the community, and that requires someone on-site," Prater explains. "You also need to get used to not having university support services."

Building the Capacity of District Personnel

With OSEP support, the Tucson Unified School District is designing and implementing a plan to reduce disproportionality. According to **Gail Bornfield**, Director of Special Education for the district, the goal is to bring supports to children and instructional staff prior to referral. "The process is allowing us to look at high expectations for all children," Bornfield remarks. "Support is designed to assist our instructional staff in providing high quality instruction to all children."

Instructional staff have received training in cultural awareness. In addition, the district provides several levels of support, including:

- **Behavioral specialists**. These certified professionals observe children in the classroom, prepare functional behavioral assessments, and work with teachers.
- **Social workers**. These professionals work with families and, in some cases, develop behavioral plans for the home.
- **Instructional specialists**. These professionals are assigned to the classroom and to individual children as needed. They are responsible for carrying out behavioral plans and monitoring interventions.
- **A member from the child's cultural background on the IEP team**. The district is working toward this practice.
- **Teacher tips**. These guides are written by staff and are available on the web or in print form. The tips offer practical ways to address culture through instruction.
- **Study area departments**. Departments have been created for each of the following cultural and linguistic groups: African American, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian American. The department provides specialists and tutors.

According to Bornfield, the district made a significant financial commitment to addressing disproportionality in this way. "Teams are expensive, yet critical. So too are the specialists," Bornfield explains. "However, when teachers see that specialists can be successful in their own classrooms, they have proof that children's behaviors can change and this results in more positive can-do attitudes."

Professional Knowledge and Skills

What Every Special Educator Should Know: The International Standards for the Preparation and Licensure of Special Educators now includes eleven new common core items related to multicultural skills and competencies. The guide is available from The Council for Exceptional Children. Contact: CEC Constituent Services, 1-888-CEC-SPED.

IDEA requires states to prepare annual reports documenting children served. As part of this report, states must determine if significant disproportionality based on race is occurring with respect to the identification of children with disabilities and the placement in particular settings of these children. If disproportionality is determined, a state must provide for a review, and if appropriate, revise its policies, procedures, and practices used in identification or placement.

NASDSE Provides Guidance to States

With OSEP support, the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) created Project Forum, a project that provides information and promotes utilization of research data and other information in improving results for students with disabilities. One area in which Project Forum has been involved is the disproportionate representation of students from racial and ethnic minority groups in special education.

Joy Markowitz and her colleagues at NASDSE have been addressing the topic for some time. One of their products is a resource guide that describes approaches that have potential for effectively preventing and addressing the disproportionate representation of students from racial and ethnic minority groups in special education. "The approaches outlined in the document are intended to serve as a guide," Markowitz cautions. "They were gleaned from extant literature, Project Forum's work in the area over the years, and recommendations and mutually agreed-upon remedies developed as part of resolution agreements between OCR and school districts in several states."

According to Markowitz, the search for more effective solutions requires an integrated and multifaceted approach, involving policy makers, administrators, educators, researchers, parents, advocates, students, and community representatives. "The disproportionate representation of students from racial and ethnic minority groups in special education reinforces the need for strong academic programs that foster success for all students in general and special education, including prevention and problem solving strategies," Markowitz explains. "It points to the need for implementing appropriate and effective polices and procedures for special education referral, assessment, eligibility, classification, placement, and re-evaluation. It also emphasizes the need for strong home-school-community partnerships to support the educational process, increased use of community resources to implement and enhance educational programs, and effective staff development at the preservice and inservice levels." Efforts should be made at each of these levels to address the problem.

Arkansas: Many Years Collecting and Analyzing Data

In 1988, the state of Arkansas began studying its data for evidence of disproportionality. According to **Mike Crowley**, administrator for monitoring and technical assistance, the state has always taken a positive approach. "From the very start, we told districts that disproportionality may be problematic, and that once identified, steps could be taken to correct it." In cases where disproportionality is found, districts prepare action plans. "Most district plans include reviews of instructional practices and curriculum, as well as evaluation procedures to ensure they are not culturally biased," Crowley added.

Arkansas uses the most recent December 1 child count for its statistics. The state runs a list of districts and for each, computes the percentage of minority students in general education and the percentage of minority students in special education. The two are compared and if the difference exceeds 8.3 percent, then a determination of disproportionality is made. "When we first started looking at percentages, 98 of the 311 districts had disproportionality issues to address," Crowley comments. "Now, only 51 districts have issues." Crowley points out that numbers can fluctuate in areas where there is high student mobility.

Over the years, Arkansas has refined and expanded its procedures to look at other areas. "We now are considering the placements for students according to gender, race, and disability type," Crowley explains. "We are investigating whether minority students spend more time in particular settings than their non-minority counterparts." For example, the state is asking questions of data such as: Do more African American males receive services in self-contained settings? What is the extent of their movement to less restrictive settings?

Crowley cautions that while Arkansas has had great success with its approach, it may not work in other states. "Investigating disproportionality cannot be done as a cookie cutter approach."

Contacts

Gail Bornfield
Tucson Unified School District
1010 E. Tenth Street
Tucson, AZ 85717
520-617-7323

Mike Crowley
Department of Education
State Education Building
Room 105c-4
State Capitol Mall
Little Rock, AR 72201
501-682-4225
mcrowley@arkedu.k12.ar.us

Susan Fowler & Beverly Lewman
University of Illinois
College of Education
1310 S. 6th St.
Champaign, IL 61820
217-333-4123
www.ed.uiuc.edu/coe/sped/spark

Beth Harry & Janette Klingner
University of Miami
6331 SW 67 Terrace
South Miami, FL 33143
305-284-5363

Robert Jimenez
University of Illinois
810 S. Wright Street
Champaign, IL 61820
217-333-1564
rjimen@uiuc.edu

Joy Markowitz
National Association of State Directors of Special Education
1800 Diagonal Road
Suite 320
Alexandria, VA 22134
703-519-3800

Greg Prater
Northern Arizona University
Center for Excellence in Education
Box 5774
Flagstaff, AZ 86011
520-523-8979
gregory.prater@nau.edu

LeVan Townsel
Highland Park Community Junior High School
15900 Woodward
Highland Park, MI 48203
313-252-1760

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CLAS

Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services for Early Childhood (CLAS) collects, reviews, and catalogs materials and practices developed for families and children representing culturally and linguistically diverse populations. Visit the website at **http://clas.uiuc.edu.** For more information, contact **Rosa Milagros Santos** at 800-583-4135.

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Jane Burnette, *Publications Manager, ERIC/OSEP Special Project*

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ERIC/OSEP Special Project
The ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education
The Council for Exceptional Children
1920 Association Dr.
Reston, VA 20191-1589
(703)620-3660 TTY(703)264-9449
(800)328-0272 **http://ericec.org**

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